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## INTERNAL CONSULTANTS AS POSITIVE CHANGE AGENTS

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### **ABSTRACT**

Capitalizing on recent publications, this paper studies the influence of change agents on positive organizational change. With qualitative research involving internal consultants as change agents, findings have shown that current positive change models, specifically the theory of psychological capital, require contextual enhancements to be anchored in organizational change. In conjunction with traditional change models, and further research and case studies that facilitate the transition to incorporate the relevant models, internal consultants attain the ability to induce positive change in organizations.

**Keywords:** Internal consultancy, positive organizational change, psychological capital

## INTRODUCTION

In his paper “Can Positive Employees Help Positive Organizational Change? Impact of Psychological Capital and Emotions on Relevant Attitudes and Behaviors,” James Avey calls for more research investigating concepts of positivity in the context of organizational change (2008). His study suggests that “[...] employees’ psychological beliefs, expectancies, and appraisals (i.e., hope, efficacy, optimism, resilience, or PsyCap) may be a good potential source for positive emotions and subsequent employee attitudes and behaviors related to positive organizational change (p. 64).” Based on his research, he encourages further analysis of influencers of change (mediators and moderators) and the consequent impact on employee psychological capital and positive emotions. This paper intends to study the influence of internal consultants as change agents on positive organizational change with the application of relevant models.

Both fields of organizational studies, internal consultancy and positive organizational change, are, academically speaking, still in their infancies. Only during the last decade have different concepts of consultancies been investigated on a larger scale, and only in recent years has internal consultancy taken shape in academic research. The main point of interest has primarily been the difference between internal and external consults, only little has been explored with regards to the impact and dynamics of internal change agents towards organizational performance.

The notion of positive organizational studies can also be considered a new field. It has increasingly raised academic and corporate interest as studies so far have shown

beneficial results when incorporating positive organizational concepts into organizational settings.

This research attempts to affiliate the two topics by examining how internal consultants can deploy their advantages of being an organizational member to engage employee psychological capital in change projects as advocated by Avey.

### *Practical Relevance*

Understanding the dynamics of internal consultancy, or consultancy in general, and positive organizational change aims to improve organizational change processes and increase the success rate of change projects. From an organizational perspective, comprehending the effects of positive change within internal consultancies enable further targeted personnel development and guidance. As the results of this research reflect positive organizational change of a limited selection of teams, the outcome is not to be translated credulously into different contexts of other organizations. Nonetheless, the findings can impact, reinforce or contradict the emerging incorporation of positive change in organizational design.

## **INTERNAL CONSULTANCY**

Although consultancy gathered momentum and importance across the corporate world, limited research has been conducted on the dynamics of internal consultants. When thinking about consultancy, the picture that will come to mind marks the big American consultancy firms, such as McKinsey that stretched their approaches and models across the globe. The corporate reality shows however, that the majority of consultancy firms

are small, local organizations, often run by former managers of the corporate world or ex-consultants of major consultancies (Cristina Crucini and Matthias Kipping, 2001). Another emerging dimension of the consultancy world are internal consultancies, operating within the context of one organization. The definition used for this paper is based on Lacey's understanding of internal consultants as "[...] an organization development professional who is employed full time by an organization, and who reports to a general manager or other senior manager (1995, p.1)." The term "consultant" has often been used interchangeably with "change agent," as consultancy is always about change, lead by one or more persons (Craig C Lundberg, 1997). So far, the literature on internal consultants has pre-dominantly focused on a comparison between external and internal consultancies (e.g. HP Johri et al., 1998, Miriam Y Lacey, 1995). In spite of goal congruency toward the improvement of client business and tackling its problems, differences between external and internal consultants were noted as summarized by Amanda Trosten-Bloom:

*"I think the main difference between internal and external consultants is that the internal consultant is more focused on task and the external on process.*

*Neither is 'better' than the other: In order to have strategic change, you must have both."* - Amanda Trosten-Bloom, Corporation for Positive Change  
(Beverly Scott, 2000)

The main themes of comparison address financial considerations, industry/specialized knowledge, insight into corporate culture, compliance, business knowledge, credibility, authority, experience and follow-up (Cristina Crucini and Matthias Kipping, 2001, Joe O'Mahoney, 2010, Beverly Scott, 2000, Christopher Wright, 2009, Nick Wylie et al.,

2010). As [a] part of the organization, internal consultants are often chosen for process- and compliance-related projects. Knowing the organization's political structures and dynamics further qualifies internal consultants to solve sensitive issues within the company. Projects can be assisted over a long period of time, often over several years, developing a close and trusting relationship with clients (Beverly Scott, 2000).

Externals get frequently involved reason to their highly specialized knowledge and industry background, whereas internal consultants profit from operational intelligence and strategic comprehension from within the organization (Christopher Wright, 2009). As the insider position can be both, a blessing and a curse, advantages deal primarily with organizational insight and fit, whereas the disadvantages evolve mainly around the lack of freedom of client choice and inflexible work processes (Miriam Y Lacey, 1995). Wylie et al. (2010) then point out, the analysis of internal consulting in the context of external consultancy leads to the assumption that little is known about the organization and activities of internal consultants as a stand-alone organization (see also Andrew Sturdy and Nick Wylie, 2011). Even with an increasing interest in the topic, so far, a limited amount of research has been conducted to uncover the ongoings of internal consultancy itself, its organization, processes, dynamics and impact, which might find its cause in limited data access and confidentiality protocols, as well as lack of a clear distinction between management and consultancy in many organizations (Andrew Sturdy and Nick Wylie, 2011).

Another interesting concept, new to the field of organizational studies, is consultancy and liminality. Originated in French literature by Arnold van Gennep, the term liminality can be defined "as a place between two worlds or spheres of culture (Glessie

Reese, p. 1).” It represents the blurry state in which individuals shift from one environment and context to another. Sometimes also referred to as “betwixt and between,” external consultants are in a constant state of liminality, with unclear job definitions, lack of distinction between professional and personal life. An outsider to the organization, yet working there as a temporary employee (Andrew Sturdy et al., 2006) mirrors organizational membership ambiguity, a term coined by Wright as “outsiders within (2009).” Bolstering the term further, internal consultants are expected to act independently, detached from hierarchy and structures despite being a part of the organization. As Czarniawska and Mazza elucidate, “a liminal organization shares its legal boundaries and physical environment with a proper work organization, but it forms a virtual space, experienced differently by consultants than by the regular employees (2003, p. 273).” Yet, as full employees, internal consultants are part of a system and need to submit to organizational regulations.

Liminality and ambiguity are not necessarily indicators for negative tensions. Undefined and blurry capacities leave room for creativity allowing consultants to open up to new methods. Subsequently, it seems to be exactly this state of insight as well as belongingness to an organization that explains the advantages of internal over external consultants.

## **POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

Deriving from Seligman’s movement of positive psychology, scholars are conversing the underlying principles of human flourishing and well-being (Alex P Linley et al.,

2006) to an organizational setting (Laura Morgan Roberts, 2006). In organizational studies, two main schools of thought have crystalized, positive organizational scholarship (POS), driven by Kim Cameron and the University of Michigan, and positive organizational behavior (POB) explored by Luthans (S.I. Donaldson and I. Ko, 2010, Debra Nelson and Cary L Cooper, 2007). The distinction between the two is not clear as both developed during the same time and share several overlapping papers and topics. In general, POS is considered to be focusing on trait-like capacities and processes such as thriving, flourishing, resilience, and growth; whereas POB is understood to emphasize state-like qualities as Luthans' psychological capital (PsyCap) of confidence/efficacy, optimism, hope, and resiliency (Arran Caza and Kim S Cameron, 2008, Fred Luthans, 2002, Fred Luthans et al., 2006, Debra Nelson and Cary L Cooper, 2007).

In literature, positive change was referred to an amelioration of a perceived bad situation, mainly in the context of disease or psychological difficulties. In March 2008, the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science issued a special issue which focused on positive organizational change. The issue was based on the understanding of positive organizational change as “[...] the investigation of positive dynamics, positive attributes, and positive outcomes in organizations (Kim Cameron, 2008 p. 7).”

Organizational change efforts are generally the result of conflict and incongruity between an organization and its environment, driven by organizational strategies and objectives. Despite extensive and numerous academic and corporate research on strategic organizational change, the influences of employee cooperation and motivation



for successful change has been put in focus only recently. As employees are the carriers and implementors of change, the organizational setting and individual attitude need to welcome change. Avey et al. (2008) argue that all four elements of Luthans' PsyCap need to be present in employees and deeply rooted in the organizational culture to ensure change be accepted and implemented.

*“They must have the confidence (efficacy) to adapt to organizational change as well as the resilience to bounce back from setbacks that are bound to occur during the change process. Moreover, it follows that to be successful, employees undergoing change would need to have the motivation and alternate pathways determined (i.e., hope) when obstacles are encountered and make optimistic attributions of when things go wrong and have a positive outlook for the future.”* (James B Avey, Tara S Wernsing and Fred Luthans, 2008, p. 49)

In this paper, positive organizational change agents are understood as internal consultants who initiate and nurture the development of PsyCap to facilitate organizational change. It is important to note that positive organizational change can be the outcome of perceived negative events, such as difficulties, downsizing, corporate losses, etc. This research does not take the matter and motivation of change into consideration however, and solely regards contextual effects and dynamics. Following this interpretation of positive organizational change agents, it is crucial to investigate the change agents understanding, conscious and unconscious, of PsyCap, as well as their ability to convey the underlying principles into the corporate change process.

Internal consultants in the role of positive organizational change agents, allows research to focus on the application of PsyCap as the insider position allows these consultants to understand organizational culture and processes and focus solely on the matter of the change. (As opposed to external consultants who need to acquire and internalize insider knowledge before proposing organizational change.) Despite the matter and motivation of the proposed change being of secondary importance for this research, it is restricted to internal consultants who deal with organizational development, rather than entrepreneurial or strategic change efforts. Internal consultants in this field are assumed to have a deeper knowledge on organizational behavior, as well as an appreciation for positive organizational effects. As change agents from within an organization, their influence on the corporate culture and individual behavior is assumed to be quintessential.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Research strategy*

The research strategy for this study follows a qualitative approach using Grounded Theory for data analysis to attain the objectives of the study optimally. Internal change agents were thus identified, whose influence stimulates positive organizational change. Choosing a qualitative approach to understand the interviewees point of view to gather more background data (Alan Bryman, 2010), a deeper insight is gained into the understanding and commitment towards positive change.

### *Sample selection*

The sampling method used for this research was purposive sampling, choosing the sample which showed the highest relevance with regards to the research objective (A. J. Veal, 2006). The sample for the research comprised 22 internal consultants in organizational development of three large multinational organizations and two mid-sized companies, all based in Germany. In sessions of on average thirty minutes, the participants were interviewed individually. Experience as internal consultants ranged from six months to over ten years. The gender split was at nine women to thirteen men. The cultural backgrounds were diverse, including five different nationalities, German being the most frequent.

Needless to say, using purposive sampling, the sample is not representative of the population (internal consultancy), consequently the research findings are hardly generalizable (Alan Bryman, 2010). However, as the study aims to understand the dynamics of internal consultants towards positive organizational change, the research interpretations rather target to present academic evidence than to produce theory. As the study takes place at one point in time and does not follow up on participants afterwards to study further development, the sample is considered to be cross-sectional (reflecting the attitude of the chosen internal consultants at the moment of the research).

### *Information retrieval*

To gather information, the above described sample was interviewed with an informal and unstructured interview approach. A wide variety of data provided more insight into the research topic and enabled the development of questions as interviews proceeded

(G. A. Churchill and D. Iacobucci, 2005). Theoretical background on the topics of internal consultancy and positive organizational change, particularly PsyCap, was prepared in advance to guide the interviews. The development of interview guidelines and research hypotheses were omitted intentionally allowing the researcher to explore topics as they arise, not stifling unanticipated, yet insightful matters (G. A. Churchill and D. Iacobucci, 2005). The study aims to give access to a better understanding of internal consultants and positive organizational change, hence the focus was on researching opinion, attitude and related issues. The unstructured approach has been fruitful in the sense that it aligned with Grounded Theory—used for data analysis. Interviews were held in an informal setting, to ensure an atmosphere of confidentiality and ease, distant to managerial influence to avoid the Hawthorne effect and ensure authentic responses. All participants were given a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity.

### *Data analysis*

To analyze the data findings of the interviews, Grounded Theory was applied. Labels were generated through coding (open-coding in this case), then combined into more abstract concepts and categories (Alan Bryman, 2010). Despite its scope, the research expanded the concept of positive organizational change for internal consultancies and generated a solid foundation for further research as proposed in this paper.

### *Research challenges*

Challenges of the research included:

- Language barriers, since many interviews were held in English with non-native interviewees
- Translation issues, as some interviews were held in German
- Different cultural understandings between the researcher (German) and the interviewees (various backgrounds)
- Adaptation of literature to the local, organizational context
- Bias and stereotypes

## **FINDINGS**

The open interview design, conducted in an informal atmosphere allowed internal consultants to speak freely and unreserved. Using Grounded Theory as research design, the conversations evolved around the input topic of PsyCaps in organizational change, without directing the interviewee towards specific pre-defined hypotheses.

After thorough data analysis – through coding, conceptualizing, and categorizing – three main themes with several sub-categories emerged:

1. General application of the PsyCaps model in organizational change
  - a. Appreciation of the model
  - b. Completeness of model
  - c. Importance of the four PsyCap elements
2. Organizational fit of model
  - a. Fit into organizational structures and procedures

b. Fit into organizational change operations

### 3. Relationship between role of internal change agent and the implementation of PsyCaps into organizational change

#### **General application of the PsyCap model in organizational change**

This theme establishes a general understanding of PsyCaps from the internal consultants perspective, allowing them to voice their opinion on its application and viability for their professional purposes.

#### *General appreciation of PsyCap model*

During the sampling processes of the interviewees, the research title “Internal consultants as positive change agents” was very well-received. The consultants showed a high level of interest in the topic of positive change, eager to retrieve more information. Some participants even invited other colleagues to join the research to familiarize with the topic.

After getting introduced to PsyCap, all but one participant reacted with appreciation. Acknowledging the model and its elements, they believed in its validity and soundness, and could easily imagine it to have positive effects on change efforts.

The participant showing less appreciation for the model, did so based on the understanding that the four elements of PsyCap ought to be common among employees, without the need for a formal model. Hence, the content of the model remained adequate.

### *Completeness of model*

Conversations about the model, and thorough discussions about its usefulness in organizational change led to the identification of missing elements, categorized into individual and contextual features. For some participants, adding a social aspect to emphasize on the importance of teamwork being vital to change, would complete the model on an individual level. More dominantly missed were contextual issues, such as supportive structures and processes, a higher level of transparency and flow of information, and especially with relevance to change. One participant said “it would be great if employees were hopeful, optimistic, resilient and confident, to facilitate change. But without a close connection to the [change] issue it’s just undirected great energy.”

### *Importance of PsyCap elements*

Not all of the four elements were perceived equally important for the change process. The least important seemed to be “resilience” as setbacks are perceived to be anticipated and absorbed by the change agents themselves, and not experienced by the employees. The majority of internal consultants considered optimism to be of highest importance. As one participant put it: “For organizational change it is of utmost importance that employees have a positive future outlook and believe that change will make things better.” Some interviewees understood “confidence” as the basis for change which needs to be developed so that hope and optimism can ensue.

## **Organizational fit of model**

This category ties the aspects of a consultant's daily work with the PsyCap model as part of change design.

### *Fit into organizational structures and procedures*

While discussing the model and its implications, issues of practicality and implementation arose. Being involved into several change projects simultaneously, often involving over a hundred employees, it is impossible for the internal consultants to be in direct contact with all employees; abstrusely, in some projects this direct contact between consultant and employees is not permitted. As a consequence, it is almost unimaginable to evaluate employee's PsyCap on an individual level by the change agent. In general, the kick-off of a change project includes a stakeholder analysis, which can be based on management's perceptions or in some cases be founded on interviews with a careful selection of employees. Also, some change projects involve a survey, inquiring the general sentiment towards the change topic, which could be a vehicle for some of Luthans' PsyCap questionnaire questions. As one interviewee stated, "if we somehow managed to include this questionnaire into the attitude survey, we could better understand how many resources we will need for the project. [...] and also, we could build training and development programs right into the change design."

Especially larger projects make use of so called multipliers, which are employees specially assigned to drive the change and act as liaison between employees and internal consultants. Some participants proposed to use the PsyCap model and consider the Luthans' questionnaire to select such multipliers. However, as some others pointed out,



the nomination of this position is often very political and management uses the role of multipliers to reward some employees or in other cases, keep elderly employees busy.

Another concept emerging in several interviews was the translation of the PsyCap model into change management models such as Kotter's eight-step change model. Optimism was converted into sense of urgency, hope was part of creating and communicating the vision, and the whole model was included in the selection process of the guiding coalition. Also other models were mentioned in the same context, such as Eysenck's model of personality, the stakeholder matrix and Kübler-Ross' change curve.

#### *Fit into organizational change operations*

Unfolding the usage of the PsyCap model sparked discussions on whether the model could actually be employed in their companies and in their daily setting. The clear majority admitted that despite their appreciation of the model, they would not be able to integrate it in their change projects. The reasons were manifold, such as "business doesn't value these things," "we've got bigger fish to fry," or "I will never get a questionnaire approved by the local work council."

Only three participants were certain that they could include the model into change projects, either through adding questions to the general survey, or by selling the idea to their clients, "if there is academic research and maybe some successful case studies, we can sell it to the client."

### **Relationship between role of internal change agent and the implementation of PsyCaps into organizational change**

When talking about their role as internal consultants in the change process, all participants confirmed the previously discussed academic research by appreciating their organizational knowledge and understanding of internal processes and dynamics, yet they are seen and see themselves as outsiders to their clients' business units. However, this position does not allow for an easier implementation of the PsyCap model or any other addition to the general change process, as "clients are not willing to invest in anything different from what they have heard through the grapevine from their colleagues, our previous clients."

Five of the participants have worked as external consultants in the past and even though they acknowledge that the client relationship is much smoother now, as external consultants new concepts and adapted change designs could be sold to clients with less effort. As internal consultants, they are expected to employ techniques and processes which have proven successful in previous projects.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings reveal internal consultants' continued demand for new input that stimulates their jobs and boosts successful change operations. Especially the idea of positive change was welcomed enthusiastically—reverberating the prospects of employee-friendly and enduring change designs.

The interview outcomes also manifest what was shown in the introduction of the topic of positive organizational change earlier in this paper—the model of psychological capital was initially developed for the purpose of “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement,” (Fred Luthans and Allan H Church, 2002, p. 59) and not specifically for organizational change. The model can be used as a sub-structure for change design, where the development of PsyCap amongst employees serves as a basis for more traditional change structures, such as Kotter’s eight-step model.

It seems that the idea of psychological capital itself misses the direct link to change – a prerequisite for internal consultants or change agents in general – to fulfill all requirements for a corporate project design. To use it as a stand-alone model in organizational change, PsyCap needs to be expanded by a contextual factor, such as the proposed element of supportive organizational structures and processes. With this extension, the model would evolve into a systemic concept, embracing both, individual traits and circumstantial factors. Deriving from this insight, the first proposition of this paper is: *The PsyCap model could be fully employed by (internal) change agents for positive organizational change if supplemented with contextual, change-related elements.*

Augmenting the model will further allow a closer fit between daily change structures and the PsyCap model. In conjunction with further academic research and annotations to traditional change models, internal consultants would be eligible to propose the

inclusion of PsyCap in change projects, no longer as a nice-to-have but an imperative modification to existing designs. Synchronous with academic efforts to establish PsyCap measurement and development tools (e.g. Luthans' web-based training intervention), corporate change can transform the outcomes into established procedures. Thus, the second proposition of this research is: *Enabling internal change agents to implement positive organizational change, models must be supported by appropriate academic and practical research.*

Considered "outsiders within," internal consultants have the capabilities to implement such adaptations to the change process. As the interview findings confirmed, knowing the ins and outs of the organization allows consultants to act as change agents focusing on the actual organizational change issue and dealing with employee-related matters on a personal and informal level. These findings lead to the third proposition of this research: *Internal consultants are favorable agents of the corporate world to promote, boost and execute positive organizational change.*

## **CONCLUSION**

The topic of positive organizational change still in its infancy, existing research has primarily focused on individual employees and related psychological capital. This paper has assumed the perspective of change initiators, internal consultants. Investigating the other side of the change process revealed that change agents have different approaches to model application than employees.

Using the PsyCap model in the context of organizational change is recognized to be beneficial towards the common goal of efficient and successfully-implemented change in the long-run through internal change agents. However, to allow a seamless and fluent inclusion of the model into corporate change processes, certain amendments are necessary as the model needs to be extended by a contextual factor connected to change processes. The conjunction of existing traditional change models and the proposed extension of the new model is vital to achieve positive organizational change. To promote such change, internal consultants function as positive change agents with regards to the model's suitability. Further academic research and practical examples would facilitate the model's entry into formal existing structures.

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